

Stax Attax by [agnesamaranth](#), [IrisVioletta](#)

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Found Family, Multi, Stax, at least we don't think so ;), honorary siblings, not canon

Language: English

Characters: Billy (Stranger Things), Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jonathan Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Max (Stranger Things), Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

Relationships: Jonathan Byers/Steve Harrington/Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington & Max

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2017-08-10

Updated: 2017-10-02

Packaged: 2022-04-02 01:42:23

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 4

Words: 7,904

Publisher: [archiveofourown.org](#)

Summary:

She didn't quite know how it happened, but somewhere along the line she started viewing Steve Harrington as her brother more than Billy. Sometimes you find family in the most unexpected places.

A slice-of-life series about tumblr's favorite fanon siblings, Steve and Max.

1. Chapter One

Author's Note:

Hi guys! For months now a headcanon has been growing on Tumblr about Steve and Max having an honorary sibling relationship. Val (@elevenknope) and I (@stevemossington) are proud to present this collaboration about their adventures. Enjoy!

I.

Max's family moves to Hawkins from Indianapolis in June, amid her protests against ending up in a middle-of-nowhere dump where people probably marry their own cousins. She misses the anonymity of the city; slipping out of the family's run-down apartment building and skateboarding down barely-used alleys and through abandoned parking lots. She feels like everyone in Hawkins knows about her and she'd rather not have anyone in her business.

She spends her first two weeks in the town alone, leaving her house early in the mornings with a messy peanut butter sandwich in her threadbare backpack and her skateboard slung under her arm. Quickly she finds that what Hawkins lacks in abandoned parking lots it more than makes up for in quiet, dense forest. It's on one of her Saturday morning ventures that she stumbles upon a small boy in a strange fort in the woods.

II.

After meeting Will—and, shortly after that, his family and friends—weekends at the Wheelers' become a constant in Max's life, a saving grace from her father's drinking and her step-brother's temper. She likes Mike's mom and the crisp apple pie she serves fresh out of the oven. She likes Dungeons and Dragons too, which the boys teach her to play with patience. She likes the stories that Mike crafts; she makes a mental note to one day ask him to write a story about aliens. She likes her new friends, but she wonders why their faces always get so sad whenever Mike mentions the proud princess, a recurring character in so many of the campaigns they play that summer.

Steve Harrington quickly becomes another constant in her life—Mike’s sister’s boyfriend and a regular fixture in the Wheeler household. The first time she runs into him—well, she quite literally runs *into* him, sharply turning a corner with an armful of sodas that go sprawling across the tiles in all directions.

“Shit,” Max hisses and looks up at the solid body she had just bumped into. Steve grins down at her and she’s instantly struck by his smile—it’s different than Billy’s sneer or her father’s forced expression when she brings home a line of solid Bs on her report card.

Max feels her stomach flutter and she hastily looks down at the floor, annoyed at the warmth that seems to be spreading across her pale and freckled cheeks.

“Probably not a good idea to bring those down,” Steve remarks casually, “Unless you’re planning on pranking those guys?”

“No,” Max shakes her head, “If I’m going to prank them it’d be way better than exploding sodas.”

“Sure thing, Red,” Steve nods and there’s something soft behind his cockiness that Max finds reassuring. Without another word, he stoops and begins collecting the fallen cans.

III.

Steve takes an instant liking to Max, solidified when he hears her ripping on Dustin for losing a pizza-eating contest. She’s fiery and fearless and doesn’t often think before she speaks; Steve sees a little bit of his younger self in the thirteen-year-old.

“Have you met Max’s brother?” Karen asks him one evening while he’s helping with the dinner dishes—Nancy has been roped into driving the kids to the general store for more candy.

“Didn’t know she had one,” Steve shrugs. Karen bites her lip for a moment, as if carefully considering her words. Steve’s been around long enough to recognize that look: concern.

“Her last name is Mayfield,” she says finally, pointedly. It takes a

moment for the name to register, but Steve has heard it. His lips purse together almost involuntarily. Billy Mayfield who is too old to be a student but still regularly hanging around the high school in his souped-up Mustang. Billy Mayfield who is rumoured to keep a gun in his dashboard and have spent some time in juvie where he got that scar across his left eye. The last time Steve heard the name was a couple weeks ago over dinner, when his father asked him if he had heard about Carol's new boyfriend and the trouble he'd caused for Tommy. That, of course, had turned into a conversation about the kinds of people Steve was now spending his time with, something he was not ready to talk about with anyone, let alone his parents.

As he places a glass baking pan back in the cupboard, Steve isn't sure what the feeling in the pit of his stomach is but it feels like a peculiar mix of anger and pity.

IV.

The next week Max rolls her eyes at the whispers that start once she climbs the basement stairs. She knows the boys tease Lucas and Dustin about having a crush on her. When she's around they tease Will about Jennifer Hayes, even though Will doesn't seem to like her that much. No one ever teases Mike about girls. And no one teases Max about crushes, which she is just fine with. She hears the girls in the locker room after gym class twittering about their crush of the week, ignoring the redhead as they always do. Not that she wants to talk to them anyway. Crushes are stupid. Crushes are...

Steve pulling weeds in the front yard with Nancy, dirt smudged on his cheek and hair windswept. He drops grass upon his girlfriend's head and pretends to be innocent when she glares up at him. The two burst into giggles.

Max stands at the window looking out at them. Long tendrils of yearning grow inside her and she stubbornly tries to suppress them. Steve sees her from outside and gives her a quick wave. She puts on her usual scowl and stalks into the kitchen for the chips she was sent to collect.

Crushes are stupid.

V.

It's raining and Billy refuses to give her a ride, so she decides to walk. The drops pour from the sky and seep into her thin sweatshirt and sneakers but she'd rather be here than at home. Anywhere but home.

A car horn sounds from behind her, making Max turn around, a curse loaded on her tongue because she's certain it's her douchebag brother. But even through the thick hair that sticks flattened and wet to her face she can see that it's not, though the car is still familiar. It's parked in the Wheelers' driveway every Saturday night.

"Shower at home broken?" Steve shouts over the pounding rain as he rolls down the window, the car halting beside her at the curb. For maybe the fifth time in her life, Max is at a loss for words. She just huffs loudly and turns away, not in the mood for jokes. "Hey!" Steve's shout reaches her ears and makes her face him once more. His face has softened, the smirk morphed into a small smile. He jerks his head toward the passenger seat.

"Get in. I know we're heading to the same place anyway."

Her feet move as if by magic, and suddenly she's seated next to him, dripping onto the leather. Since when is she so easily convinced to do anything? There's a strange trust here, so foreign to her that it's almost uncomfortable. But along with that comes the unfamiliar sensation of being tongue-tied. She wishes that Steve were somehow not as nice or not as funny.

Then he puts on the radio and the sound of the Go-Gos fills the car. She's about to roll her eyes when she realizes that he's started to sing along.

"See the kids just getting out of school. They can't wait to hang out and be cool," he softly croons, drumming his palms against the steering wheel. Max just stares at him. Steve Harrington is...

A

Huge

DORK.

She can't help the peals of laughter that escape, especially when he holds his hand to his heart in mock offense. "Miss Mayfield, are you laughing...*at me?*"

Max just laughs louder, the tension from before shattered. She thinks that maybe she doesn't have a crush on him anymore.

That evening, Steve drives her home, not asking any questions when she instructs him to stop at the end of the block, even though he knows she lives at least ten houses down. He picks her up in the same spot the following Saturday, and Max knows he's lying when he tells her that he was just in the neighbourhood.

No one with a car and a smile as nice as Steve's is ever *just* in their neighbourhood.

Max feels comfortable enough to throw her feet on the dashboard now, and notices when he takes a right where they should have taken a left. Throwing him a quizzical look she asks, "Uh, did you forget where the Wheelers live?"

"No! Mrs. Wheeler's new blender is ready for pick-up at the store and I'm grabbing it for her."

"That's awfully nice of you." Her voice is dripping in sarcasm.

"I don't appreciate that tone. I'm a nice guy!" He insists. "But, if you must know, McDonald's is on the way so..."

Max nods in understanding.

"You're smarter than your hair makes you look."

"Thank you?"

By the time they arrive at the Wheelers' with the blender, Max is full of milkshake and fries and a new appreciation for this strange boy.

2. Chapter Two

I.

Billy has noticed Steve at the school and around town. Those preppy clothes, that smarmy face, that ridiculous hair - it makes Billy sick. Carol's always complaining about him and that girl, Nancy. Not that he pays much attention to what Carol says. That's not what he keeps her around for. But he starts noticing Steve more and as he watches he discovers something else. A familiar redhead riding in his car, hopping out a purposeful distance from home, holding milkshakes, running into the gas station for licorice while Steve fills the tank.

It's late on a Friday when Billy opens his pack of cigarettes only to find it empty. *Shit*. He doesn't have any cash on him but his fingers twitch with a need to light one up. He sneaks into Max's room, as she's off somewhere. He knows the little rat has a pack stuffed somewhere in here. Digging through the desk and dresser is unsuccessful but finally he finds the half-full pack buried in her nightstand. As he picks it up he notices the photo underneath. Max and Steve sitting next to a mall Santa Claus, both making faces at the camera.

What the actual fuck?

Billy quickly lights a cigarette but even the sweet relief of nicotine isn't enough to quell the disgust simmering in his stomach. There's always been something he didn't like about Steve, maybe the way everyone seems to look at him with blatant admiration: his pretty girlfriend, their queer friend who's always with them, Billy's own sister. Maybe it's the shiny car he drives, the large house that Carol once pointed out as his. Maybe it's just that his face is so punchable. But now there's a solid reason. A thirteen-year-old? Even *he* isn't that sick.

He gives the gas pedal an extra push as he zips over to the Harringtons' house. Steve is taken aback when he finds Billy Mayfield at his door but tries not to show it, instead stepping onto the stoop and closing the door behind him. He doesn't need his parents hearing whatever Billy has to say.

“Mayfield.”

“Harrington.”

“You get lost on the way to the liquor store?”

Billy sneers back. “What the fuck are you doing with my sister?”

Steve is surprised. He thought this would be about Carol or Tommy, or even Nancy, who he’s always leering after. He hadn’t gotten the impression that Billy even cared about Max.

“What are you talking about?”

Billy scoffs. “I see you riding around town with her.”

Steve keeps his voice level, choosing his words carefully. “She’s friends with Nancy’s brother. I drive her to their house.”

“Really? That’s it?”

“She’s a nice kid. She’s pretty cool.” Something is wrong here, something is very wrong.

“She’s a little bitch. Always has been. Just like her mom.”

Steve’s blood boils but he keeps still. “Maybe she just needs a good brother.”

“Oh, really? Is that what you are? A brother?” Billy leans forward with a sickening smile, lowering his voice. “See, I just thought you were collecting another virgin. That’s your specialty, right?”

Fist collides with face and for a moment Steve can only see red. Billy is quick to retaliate and tries to throw him off, but Steve won’t back down. How dare he, how *dare* he? Then the door opens and Mr. Harrington is pulling his son back, yelling at Billy to “get off his damn property.”

As they watch Billy tear away, Steve feels the cold cut of steel in his gut and readies himself for his dad’s insults. But to his surprise, he simply claps him on the back.

“Trash, right?”

Steve nods numbly back, but doesn't feel any better.

II.

Steve hisses as the alcohol stings his knuckles. Usually Nancy would be the one to insist on cleaning his wounds, but he's loath to mention the incident to her or Jonathan. Had this happened to either of them he knows he'd be in his car without thinking; hunting a different kind of monster.

He burns with shame, an uncomfortable and angry feeling that's redder than the rawness of his knuckles eating away at him. How could he have let himself believe that Max would fill the void in his heart that aches each time he sees Jonathan scoop Will up and over his shoulder, every time he watches Nancy playfully rumple Mike's already unruly hair.

As he wraps gauze haphazardly around his hand, Steve chews the inside of his lip until he can taste the rusty tinge of blood on his tongue. It was stupid to have thought he'd ever make a good role model; that he'd ever make a positive difference in someone's life.

And even though it kills him to think it, maybe Billy was right. He is her brother after all - well, *step*-brother but that still counts as family. *Real* family. Steve should step back, should leave her to her own family and accept that fact that his is a cold and broken trio.

She doesn't need him. But he can't stop thinking about the way Will looks at Jonathan, the way Mike looks at Nancy. He just wishes that someone would look at him that way.

He glances up at his reflection and realizes there are tears welling in his eyes and the awareness only causes them to spill up and over his cheeks.

That *fucker*.

III.

Max waits at the usual spot on Saturday but he never comes. She tries

not to look at her watch as she balances on the curb, craning her neck to see around the bend in the road. But after half an hour her palms start to feel clammy and the slick, familiar feeling of abandonment creeps into her chest.

He's just late, Max tells herself. Or sick. Maybe he drank last night.

And for a moment, the excuses work. She hops off the curb and draws patterns in the dusty gutter with her toe. Minutes pass. She strikes her foot against the curb and continues to kick and kick again because the sharp pain in her toes is a distraction from what she feels inside. And it's okay to tear up over hurt toes. She refuses to cry over Steve Fucking Harrington. She tries not to think about it as she walks the lonely road to Mike's house, where Steve is nowhere to be found.

The boys notice when Max is unusually quiet, but they don't say anything. El watches from under her eyelashes, the change in the redhead leaving her troubled. After a day of games and TV and jokes, El pulls her aside while everyone gets ready to leave.

"Are you okay?" She asks and Max's first instinct is to bite back. But she stops herself. This is El, this is her friend, this girl who is soft but strong, who has never judged her and always supported her for who she is. Instead Max looks to the carpet in mild embarrassment.

"Um, I'm just worried about Steve. He didn't pick me up today. Or call." She looks back up at Eleven and shrugs. "I'm just being stupid. I'm sure it's fine."

Her hair flips as she bounces away and El keeps her mouth shut. She can see right through everything her friend says.

Days turn into weeks and Max still hasn't heard a peep from Steve. She stubbornly tries to suppress the dull pain of loneliness sitting inside her.

Nancy notices. She always notices when something is off. Steve is suddenly very insistent that they hang out at the Byers' or at the mall or anywhere but her house. She doesn't want to push him, so she says nothing, but she takes note all the same. And then one night Mike comes to her door. Ever since the incident of November '83, the two

siblings have worked hard to be honest with one another. It's one promise they're determined to keep.

"Hey."

"Hey." He shrugs his shoulder forward as if to ask if he can come in. She opens the door further to allow him.

"So, um, this is kinda awkward but...El mentioned that Max is acting weird."

Nancy quirks an eyebrow at him.

"About Steve. She said that Max said he's avoiding her. Like...they haven't talked in weeks. I know it's weird, I know they're not brother and sister but...I dunno. I noticed that he hasn't been around here lately. And I think she's really upset about it. She just won't tell us." He finishes with a shrug and holds his chin close to his chest.

Nancy simply nods. It doesn't surprise her, after the change in Steve's demeanor, after the sudden shift of activities. She clears her throat and softly responds, "Okay."

His eyes dart up to her, wary, almost worried. She gives a slight smile. "Okay. I'll talk to him."

He doesn't have to say it, because she sees it in his grin. *Thank you.* She wants to hug him but would that be weird? He's still her dorky little brother. So instead she contents herself with a soft punch to his shoulder and his smile widens as he heads to the door.

IV.

Saturday evening and Nancy insists Steve come over for dinner, claiming her mother misses having him around. It's not entirely a lie, but she still feels guilt tugging at her stomach as she opens the front door and leads Steve into the living room where Jonathan is already waiting.

Steve tries to keep his tone light, joking, "Is this an intervention? Have I been smoking too much again?"

Nancy broaches the subject delicately, with tact, her lips pursed tightly but her eyes soft as she watches Steve's face contort with hurt. Jonathan is not quite so poised and when Steve finally reiterates what Billy said, word by disgusting word, Jonathan's jaw clenches and his knuckles go white squeezing the arm of the sofa.

"I'll kill him," he growls, vibrating with determined rage. Steve opens his mouth to protest, but Nancy gets there first, placing a hand on Jonathan's shoulder. The gesture is meant to comfort, but Steve can see the tension held in her body, the way her muscles are taut and her back rigid. She and Jonathan lock eyes and Steve can see the silent conversation between them. Surprised and uneasy over how fearful he seems. Angry that something, someone, would hurt their boy. He's reminded of his thoughts when Billy stood before him: *how dare he?* Then they break apart and look back at Steve.

"Why didn't you tell us?" Nancy asks. Her words are brimming with anger, her eyes narrowed and full of betrayal as she stares him down. In his head, Steve can hear the memory of his own voice speaking in hushed tones. October 1984. *We'll always protect each other.*

But how can they protect him without hurting themselves? He's flooded with thoughts: the rumors of Billy's past, the dog he purposefully hit, the black eye that Carol sported a month ago.

"Because of this," Steve gestures towards Jonathan, whose foot is tapping a nervous beat into the carpeted floor. "Because you'd get involved and get hurt! It's not your fight!"

"That's our choice." Nancy says, her voice quivering dangerously. "He's a monster, Steve." She stands and without another word, stalks towards the front door, Jonathan close behind her.

Steve curses and shouts after them. This will not become their mess too.

The shouting draws an audience, teenage feet scrambling up the basement stairs and six sets of eyes shifting back and forth, following exchanged words.

Steve is standing in the front entryway, his shoulders squared and his

face flushed. His hand is clasped around Jonathan's arm. Nancy looks angrier than Mike has ever seen her as she hurriedly laces her boots.

"Nancy!" Steve is shouting, his voice strained as though he's on the verge of some breaking point, "Just stop! He's a psycho."

"What happened?" Will pipes up, though his voice sounds like a squeak compared to Steve.

"Nothing," Jonathan shoots his brother a firm look, "All of you go back downstairs."

"You're all acting nuts!" Mike takes a step forward, his arm still protectively hovering in front of Eleven.

"Is this about Billy?"

The words suck all the air out of the room. Max, having spoken them, crosses her arms over her chest and glares in Steve's direction. A tense electric moment passes and then Steve's shoulders slump.

"He said some shit," Steve mutters, careful to avoid looking at her. Nancy and Jonathan exchange a glance and Max can read in their expressions exactly what Billy said. Fire sears up her throat and through her veins.

Max launches forward with a growl, desperate and thick with pent-up frustration. Before anyone can react she's pummeling Steve with her fists, tears leaking freely down her face. She's never cried in front of her friends, but she forgets herself for a moment, forgets the facade she's constructed to keep herself safe.

"You idiot!" she hisses as she continues to beat at Steve, "Why would you listen to him? He's sick! He's *sick*! And you just...you just *left*. Just like everybody else!"

Steve remains still, not defending himself, allowing Max to bruise her feelings onto his arms. He feels a prickle of tears in his eyes.

Max realizes, as she strikes him, that Steve is supposed to be the one to teach her to drive, to help with her college applications (if she ever wants to go to college), to do all the things that older brothers do.

"You're not supposed to leave! You're my—" Her voice cracks and the word *brother* dies in her throat, afraid of escaping her lips and being told she's silly for thinking anyone would actually willingly be her family.

A lump forms in Steve's throat and in a single, swift motion, he wraps his hands around Max's wrists, holding them firmly in place, stopping the barrage.

"Max." There's something quaking behind his words, the hint of an apologetic smile creeping to his lips. "You've got to realize that if I'm your big brother, I have to retaliate when you start hitting me."

Max snuffles and stares up at him, still glowering behind her tears.

"Do you mean it?"

"Mean what?"

"That you're my big brother?"

Steve smirks and scoops her up, tossing her over his shoulder and spinning around with abandon. As he sets her down he smirks. "Yeah, you little dweeb."

A smile breaks over her face until Dustin pipes up. "Aww, this is so sweet."

Max whips her head to glare at him and then lunges at him with her fist aimed for his arm. Steve catches her before she can hit her target.

"Whoa there Rocky, I think you've had enough practice for today. Who wants ice cream? My treat."

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks for reading!! Let us know what you think :)

- Val & Lara

3. Chapter Three

October 1987

I.

Max sits slumped in the plastic chair, arms crossed, eyes avoiding the secretary typing away at her desk. She sports a bruise on her jaw, but takes some comfort in knowing the other girl looks far worse.

Kimberly Roberts has been the bane of Max's entire high experience so far. Perfectly feminine, perfectly popular, perfectly cruel. She's always made cutting remarks to Max, and while the latter is usually good at shrugging off insults - you have to be if you're going to be in this group of friends - Kimberly is unusually skilled at hitting her sore spots. It's been building for weeks and this afternoon was the last straw.

Max and Will were walking in the hallway together, heading to fifth period history, when they passed Kimberly and her cronies.

"Oh, look, it's the fairy and the butch. A match made in heaven," She smirked, her friends giggling behind their hands.

Max whipped around and glared at her. "Shut the hell up, Roberts."

Will grabbed her arm and gently tried to pull her along, but Kimberly simply raised her eyebrow, looking amused. She scoffed, her smile icy and sharp.

"You're so pathetic. You're gonna end up just like your brother - a coked-out loser."

That was it. Max hates when anyone brings up Billy, let alone imply that she's similar to him in any way. She lunged forward and her right hook collided with Kimberly's cheek. Soon the girl was pinned under Max, struggling, although she managed to get in one or two punches. The shouts of "Fight, fight!" filled the hall but Max couldn't hear anything over the rush of blood in her ears. *You bitch. I'll never be like him.*

And then the crowd was parted and the girls pulled apart by teachers, each breathing heavily.

Ms. Campbell, the school secretary, had informed Max that she was calling her parents but the girl had only snorted in response. Watching her dial number after number with no luck only proved her point. Her mom's been on a bender for two days now. Her dad and stepdad are both long gone. The last she'd heard of Billy, he was living in a crackhouse on the other side of town. No one would be answering those calls.

The principal's door opens and Kimberly dramatically limps out, holding an icepack to her face. Max rolls her eyes; nothing had happened to her legs. Principal Williams stands in the doorway and sighs. "Okay, Mayfield. Let's go."

Max is used to the disappointment on her face; it's the expression she usually sees when adults look at her. She keeps her own face blank as she follows the principal.

She's only in there for a few minutes before Steve suddenly barrels into the office without knocking, tie askew and shirtsleeves rolled to the elbows. He looks scared. Principal Williams raises an eyebrow, remembering him well from his own days in the high school, just a few years ago.

"Can I help you, Mr. Harrington?"

"I heard about Max, that she's in trouble?"

"Are you her parent or guardian?"

"Um, no, but I'm a... family friend."

"Well, unfortunately, I can only discuss these matters with a family member."

"Principal Williams. Sally." He backtracks quickly when her eyes narrow. "Sorry - Principal Williams. Can I talk to you for a moment? Alone?"

"Fine. Max, please wait out in the office."

Max keeps her head down as she brushes past him. Once the door closes behind her, Steve sits down and lowers his voice.

“Look, you’re not gonna get ahold of any family member. I mean, she lives with her mom but...” He gestures around the room. “This isn’t really her thing. There’s no one else. Please, tell me what happened.”

“She gave another student a black eye.”

“Well what did that student do to her?” He asks defensively.

“It doesn’t matter. It’s assault.” Steve opens his mouth but she holds up a finger to stop him. “Steve, I know that deep down Max is a good kid. She has a lot of potential. But I don’t see anything good happening if she continues on this path. She’s prone to violent outbursts; she’s disruptive in class. Her teachers say that she’s bright but doesn’t apply herself. Her GPA needs serious work if she wants to go to college. She needs to really start thinking about her future.”

Steve slowly nods, feeling her words weigh down on his chest. “Okay. I’ll talk to her. Can I take her home?”

“Yes. Please let her know that she’s got two weeks of detention, starting tomorrow.”

II.

Neither Steve nor Max say anything while she collects her backpack and they get in his car. As he pulls out of the parking lot, she looks up at him from the corner of her eye.

“How’d you find out?”

“El. She sent me a message, you know...” He taps his temples a few times and Max understands. “Said you were in trouble and to go to the school office. Guess I should’ve known you would be the one *causing* the trouble.”

She smirks. “Would you expect anything less from me?”

But he doesn’t smile back or even look at her. “It’s not funny, Max.”

Her body instantly stiffens, not used to him actually using her name

instead of “kid” or “dweeb.” This is not a good sign. She turns her head to look out the passenger window and tries to keep her voice nonchalant. “So, what did Principal Williams say?”

“You have detention. Two weeks, starting tomorrow. You’re lucky you weren’t suspended.”

She nods - it’s not as bad as she thought it would be. The rest of the drive is silent and awkward, but when they reach her house Steve stops her from getting out.

“Your mom’s not back yet?”

“Don’t.” Her voice is soft but he can hear the hurt in it. She continues to stare out the window.

“I’m...worried about you.”

She turns her head to face him. This is not what she was expecting.

He’s not sure how to put it, what words could possibly convey what he wants to say. Sometimes he worries that he won’t be able to live up to what Max needs. He’s not the best example, staying back in Hawkins and working while his boyfriend and girlfriend go off to college to learn and study and grow. How can he give her this advice?

“You’re behind in your classes. You keep getting in trouble. You’re beating people up.”

“Okay, *dad*.”

“You gave that girl a black eye!”

“You don’t even wanna hear my side of it?” She asks incredulously. Steve is always on her side. What is going on? He raises his eyebrow, silently asking her to continue. “Kimberly Roberts is a skanky *bitch*. She’s always horrible to me and my friends. She said I’m just like Billy!”

“Well, did you ever think that sometimes you might be?” He snaps.

The world stops. What? *What?* Of everyone she's ever known, she never thought he would be the one to say that. She slowly shakes her head, face red, eyes watery, before jumping out of the car with a slam.

"Max! *Madison!*" He yells but she cuts across the neighbor's yard and disappears from his sight. He sits back, head hitting the headrest, and looks at the roof of the car. "Fuck."

III.

On Friday night, Steve sits on his couch, unable to concentrate on whatever is playing on the television, too full of worries from the week. He hasn't heard from Max in a few days. And while Mike had confirmed that she was at school on Wednesday and Thursday, she was nowhere to be found today. Steve stopped by her house during his lunch break but it seemed like no one was home. He hopes her mom had just been at work, not at the bar. His thoughts are interrupted by the shrill ringing of the phone. It's not Nancy or Jonathan's usual time to call, but maybe...they do know how concerned he's been.

"Hello?"

"Heyyy, douchebag." It's high and slurred, but he recognizes Max's voice.

"Are you drunk?"

"Maybe. What about it?"

He sighs and shakes his head. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, but can you come pick me up?" He hears voices in the background.

"Where are you?"

"Stanley's."

"You're at the *gas station?*"

"Yeah? Are you coming to get me or not?"

“I’ll be right there.”

Max hears the line disconnect and tries to hang up the payphone, missing the hook the first time. She leans against the outside of the gas station, trying to ignore the way everything is spinning. She meant to go to school this morning, she really did, but once she got there she found herself walking to the bleachers instead of the front door. She couldn’t face her friends today. They just don’t get it. Under the bleachers she ran into Chris Nelson, one of the school’s resident burnouts. She’d talked to him a few times before; her friends could be annoyingly straight-laced and sometimes she just needed a smoke in peace. A morning cigarette under the bleachers turned into an afternoon blunt at his house and then an evening of shots at his friend’s place. She wanted to forget her troubles, just for one night. But when one of the guys ran a hand up her thigh, she’d decided she’d had enough and left. She’d made it to the gas station when she realized she was too inebriated to find her way home. And now, as she waits under the harsh light, her feelings from before rush back, surrounding her, threatening to drown her. She can’t escape them.

Soon Steve is pulling up in front of her. She gets in the car but he turns it off. She keeps her eyes fixed on the nearest gas pump. Anywhere but him.

“What’re you doing, kid?” He asks quietly, fear and weary tangled in his voice. He has to tread lightly.

“What do you care?”

“I’m sorry. I never should have said that about Billy. He’s a piece of flaming shit. You’re nothing like him. But that doesn’t mean all this is okay.”

She continues to stare at the pump, focusing on the curve of the hose as it blurs. She will not cry right now.

“You have to start trying. You’re gonna hate yourself someday if you don’t.”

She shrugs, still refusing to turn her head.

“What about college?”

“I don’t...” She pauses and swallows, trying to hold back tears. “I’m not like my friends. I have no idea what I want to do tomorrow, let alone when I grow up. I’m never gonna be good enough to go to college anyway. So like...what’s the point? Why waste my time and get my hopes up for nothing?”

“You know everything you just said is bullshit, right?”

She narrows her eyes at him, lashing out. “*You’re* not going to college. *You* get drunk sometimes.”

“I want you to be better than me!” Steve shouts and slams his hand against the steering wheel. Max freezes, eyes wide. “Dammit Max, I want more for you!”

He sighs and rubs his forehead before continuing in a softer voice. “You’re so smart and awesome and you could do so many things. You really want to be stuck in this town forever?”

“You’re here,” she whispers.

“I won’t always be. When Nance and Jon are done with school... I’ll be with them. Somewhere.”

He’s right. She knows deep down he’s right. Goddammit, how is he so smart and an idiot at the same time?

“Look, I know you can do it. And if you need help, I’ll help you. But you gotta try too. You gotta start trying.”

She sniffs, a tear escaping her eye. He moves his head down, trying to meet her eyes.

“Okay?”

She nods. “Okay.”

Steve smiles, heart feeling a bit lighter. “Now how about we hit up the drive-through. I could kill for a milkshake right now.”

She laughs and he starts the car back up. It'll be okay. Everything will be okay.

Notes for the Chapter:

Chapter by Lara :)

4. Chapter Four

August 1989

I.

Max grimaces, biting back a gasp as she watches Steve stumble over the top step ahead of her, his shoelaces just barely tied. Furrowing her brow, she resists the urge to shove him, instead keeping her hands tucked into the pockets of her jean jacket, her palms sweaty with anticipation.

“Can you at least try to be careful?” Max hisses, “There’s important stuff in there!”

“So you’re saying I shouldn’t do this?” Playfully, Steve lurches forward onto the third-floor landing, waving the box in his arms as if he were going to drop it.

“Don’t even pretend,” she warns with a huff, coming up behind him and quickly knocking him in the ribs with her elbow. “You’re so clumsy you’ll actually drop it.”

And that can’t happen.

The box Steve is carrying—the first of several boxes that will end up in her first ever college dorm—is packed full of mementos from her happiest days in Hawkins. Mostly, it’s picture frames haphazardly wrapped in newspaper and holding photos of days spent with her friends at the amusement park, the aquarium, and in those awful high school graduation gowns. But there’s also an assortment of comic books from the boys, the lava lamp Lucas had shyly given to her earlier that week (*You said you liked the one in my room*), the alarm clock El had wrapped in a frilly pink ribbon (*Because you’re always late, Max*), and the telescope Steve had gifted to her on her sixteenth birthday (*For finding aliens*).

“I think you mean graceful,” Steve grins at her, that same characteristic shit-eating smirk that she’s grown so used to over the years set upon his lips. Max rolls her eyes so hard she practically sees

stars, but her snark is dampened by a wave of anxiety that washes through her stomach.

Clenching her teeth she inhales sharply, causing Steve to look down at her with a softened expression, the corners of his lips turning down slightly, but the teasing light still dancing in his eyes. He nods once, shortly and reassuringly, and Max returns the gesture. Together, they turn the corner onto a long hallway lined with identical doors. Max, her fingers feeling like butter, fishes a tiny slip of paper with a key taped to it from her pocket.

Room 316. I can do this.

“No,” she confirms, leaning on her sarcasm to steady her nerves as she begins to lead Steve down the hallway. “Definitely clumsy. It’s a miracle a monster never killed you.”

A beat of silence passes before Steve lets out a loud laugh. He sticks a foot out to teasingly trip her, but Max dodges, sticking her tongue out at her honorary big brother. It’s still strange that they can joke about those days now, the summers of monster hunting behind them like a shadowy memory.

The thought remains unspoken, but lingers on both of their minds—that the long evenings Max spent waiting by the phone in the Wheelers’ basement for a call from Steve or Nancy or Jonathan on the road will turn to Steve waiting eagerly to hear from Max about her classes and the ‘wild parties’ she has no interest in attending.

Steve wiggles his eyebrows, breaking the nostalgic silence that’s fallen between them. “It was luck.”

“*Dumb* luck,” Max retorts, continuing down the hall, fluorescents buzzing quietly overhead. Steve continues to follow along behind her to the third door from the end of the hall on the left.

“This is it,” Max mutters, her hand hovering over the doorknob. She’s nervous, Steve knows, and so he gently nudges the back of her leg with his toe, his own nerves masked a bright, amused expression.

His chest swells with pride as Max twists the key in the lock. His kid

sister made it here. She's going places.

"It'll be fine," he assures her, "Whatever is on the other side of that door won't be half as scary as that Thessyl-whatever."

II.

He's right, of course.

On the other side of the heavy wooden door, the room is half-empty, ready to be filled with her possessions. The other half is covered in David Bowie posters and there's a union jack pinned to the wall. A guitar—a nice one that Max knows would make Jonathan drool—lays on the bed closest to the door overtop blue bedsheets and next to a tall, slender girl with tightly curled black hair and charcoal eyes. She's on her feet as soon as Max walks through the door, a big smile on her dark-painted lips.

"Hey! You must be Madison! I'm Maia!"

Max cringes at the use of her full name, but swallows the annoyed retort that hovers on her tongue. Maia is not Dustin or Lucas—she's not calling her *Madison* just to annoy the living crap out of her.

"It's, uh, just Max," the red-haired girl strains to smile but Maia doesn't seem to notice her effort. She's caught sight of Steve, running his fingers through his hair having placed the box of valuables on the empty bed on the far end of the room.

"Max," Maia echoes, nodding vaguely, "Cool name. Is that your brother?" She gestures toward Steve, who turns and gives her a winning smile.

"Yeah, he's a dork," Max answers, rolling her eyes for effect while her hand comes up to tug at a strand of hair.

Maia's nose scrunches up and she cracks a wide smile. "He's cute."

Max returns her smile, a bit crookedly, torn between wanting to melt into the floor and wanting to gut punch Steve into next week.

III.

Hours pass. Maia helps her and Steve bring boxes up from the car. Steve orders takeout and refuses to accept a single cent from either Max or Maia. Max kicks Steve in the shin when he points at them, shoulder-to-shoulder against Maia's bed and makes a joke about their being M&Ms.

And then, he's saying goodbye, patting her tenderly on the shoulder and swallowing a lump in his throat while Maia politely pretends to be engrossed in a book.

"I'm proud of you," he whispers in her ear. "You're going to kick ass."

The reality hits Max like an eighteen-wheeler as the sound of the door closing behind Steve rings hollow throughout the small dorm room.

I'm finally going to be alone.

Max can't believe how the thing she had prayed for for so long is suddenly such a staggering prospect. She realizes, all at once, she had always been alone. Billy, her mother—and the shitty line up of boyfriends she had brought home—never gave a damn about her.

The Wheelers, her friends, Joyce and Hopper, Nancy and Jonathan. Steve. Him most of all. Those were the people who had drawn her out of loneliness, had given her a family and a place to go to when her world felt like it was crashing in around her. They had held up the broken edges of her life and helped her sew it back together.

I'm going to be alone...again.

Without thinking, Max bounds through the door and meets Steve just a few steps away from the room, looking forlorn. She catches him around the chest and hugs him for a long moment. When they pull apart, he ruffles her hair and neither mentions the wet spot blossomed on his shirt.

IV.

Her first night is lonely.

Dinner with Maia is filled with the usual questions she gets from

pretty girls about Steve.

Are you actually related? You don't look alike! Does he have a girlfriend? What does he do for a living? How old is he?

No. I know. Yes (and a boyfriend—though she never mentions that). He works a bunch of odd jobs now, but wants to be a teacher. Ancient as fuck.

But Max finds herself liking Maia more and more as they complain about crappy cafeteria food and swap high school horror stories (*His braces did WHAT to your lips?*). Still, she declines the invitation to go to a party, using the excuse that she's sore from moving boxes all day, and returns to her dorm, never having imagined it would be possible to miss Hawkins so much.

Even though Steve's parting words were his reassurance that she could call him whenever, Max, as she flops onto the beanbag chair Maia told her she was always free to use, resists the urge to pick up the phone on her bedside table and dial the number she knows by heart.

But after a long shower and a bottle of Coke, she still can't shake the nagging urge to talk to someone she trusts. Biting the nails on her free hand, Max quickly punches in the nine digits that will connect her to the small apartment Steve shares with Nancy and Jonathan.

Someone picks up immediately, but instead of a greeting Max hears the sounds of a scuffle and Steve distinctly calling someone a shithead. Moments pass and then there's rustling in her ear and Nancy's voice over the line.

"Hey Max." She sounds resigned, as though she's pinching the bridge of her nose. "How's your first night at college?"

"It's good," Max says in a practiced tone, sliding under the covers on her bed. "My roommate seems cool, even though she won't stop talking about Steve's hair."

Nancy chuckles and Max suddenly feels a pang of missing her too. "Let me get Steve for you. He's—well, he's been waiting by the phone

all night—”

“HAVE NOT!” Steve yells in the background and Max can’t help the giggle that escapes her lips, quickly wiping at the tears that have started to roll down her heated cheeks.

“He has,” Nancy continues, “And when it rang just now, Jonathan picked it up and wouldn’t give it to him. And—” Max hears her cover the receiver. “Would you two just stop? Steve come to the phone.”

More shuffling. More cursing. And then the voice she’s been wanting to hear.

“Hey kiddo.”

“Gross. I told you not to call me that.”

Steve laughs. “Sorry, but you’re not here to punch me so I’ll call you whatever...Red.”

Max huffs into the phone and waits for Steve to say something else, but he doesn’t. She knows he’s waiting for her speak, to tell him the reason she’s calling already.

“I just wanted to say I—uh—I miss you guys. I miss you.”

Max braces herself for the onslaught of teasing that she expects is headed in her direction, but it never comes. Instead, Steve answers softly after a short pause.

“I miss you too, Max. We all do.”

Silence lingers on the line.

“But you’re only a couple hours away,” Steve continues, happy once more, “So I’ll be coming to visit all the time. Plus, I don’t think Maia would mind.”

Ah, there it is.

“Goodnight, dumbass.”

“Night, *kiddo*.”

Max hangs up and stares at the phone for another long moment before she decides to dial another number. It rings longer this time, and a gruff voice answers.

“Hey Chief,” Max smiles into the receiver, “It’s your favourite troublemaker. Can I talk to El?”

Notes for the Chapter:

Chapter by Val :)